"The Grimmest Reversal We Have Ever Faced": AIDS and the Hard-Boiled Detective Genre in Joseph Hansen's Early Graves

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“THE GRIMMEST REVERSAL WE HAVE EVER FACED”: AIDS AND THE HARD-BOILED DETECTIVE NOVEL IN JOSEPH HANSEN’S *EARLY GRAVES*

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HONORS PROJECT

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I. Introduction

Published from 1970-1991, Joseph Hansen’s “Dave Brandstetter” series follows the titular death claims investigator through mysteries typically consisting of murder, disappearance, and insurance fraud. Brandstetter, a relatively-out, gay, middle-aged man appears in twelve novels, one short story, and a novella, the majority of which are set in Los Angeles. The series pays significant attention to Brandstetter’s personal and romantic life, particularly his string of monogamous, domestic relationships. Unlike many mystery novels, the “Brandstetter” series moves forward in time, showing Brandstetter aging, going through changes in his personal life and career, and reacting to the changing social, political, economic, and physical landscape of Southern California. The ninth novel, Early Graves is written and set in 1987, and follows Brandstetter’s investigation of the murder of real estate developer Drew Dodge after Brandstetter comes home one day to find Dodge’s body left on a bench in his front yard. Disproving the LAPD’s hypothesis that Dodge’s murder was part of a string of serial-killings targeting young, gay men dying of AIDS, Brandstetter pins the murder on Dodge’s long-lost son. Though Brandstetter ultimately succeeds, the investigation nearly cost the lives of four people, including himself, and Brandstetter retires at the end of the novel.

The “Brandstetter” series has not been the subject of much scholarship, but is typically addressed in the context of genre fiction. Scholars often focus on the extent to which the “Brandstetter” novels question or subvert the conventions of detective fiction, often attending to hard-boiled or police procedural subgenres. Most writing about the “Brandstetter” series is encyclopedic or historic, such as Mitzi Brunsdale’s Gumshoes: A Dictionary of Fictional Detectives or Robert A. Baker and Michael T. Nietzel’s 101 Knights: A Survey of American
Detective Fiction 1922-1984. Notable critical works, such as Roger Bromley’s “Rewriting the Masculine Script: The Detective Novels of Joseph Hansen” and Gill Plain’s Twentieth-Century Crime Fiction: Gender, Sexuality, and the Body provide valuable considerations of patterns across the “Brandstetter” series, though Bromley published before the series’ completion. Both Plain and Bromley attend to the novels’ definition of masculinity, which becomes broader than in classical hard-boiled fiction, but is similarly defined by power, agency, superiority, and individualism. Plain summarizes that the novels “push boundaries—but ultimately they do not break or exceed them” (87).

While I concur that Plain’s assessment aptly describes most of the series, a close reading of the ninth novel, Early Graves (1987), reveals the text wrestling with the limitations of the hard-boiled genre in addressing the AIDS crisis. The later “Brandstetter” books often link the central crimes to large social issues, as in the seventh novel, Nightwork (1984), where the central murder is intimately connected to corporate pollution, organized crime, white flight, and LA gang violence. Like several of the novels preceding it, the central crime of Early Graves is closely tied with a large social issue—in this case, the AIDS crisis. Notably, Early Graves bends, breaks, and struggles against its genre conventions in a way other novels do not. While the novels are comfortable “pushing boundaries,” as Plain argues, to attempt to settle certain contradictions and instabilities in the traditional hard-boiled genre, approaching the AIDS crisis with a hard-boiled detective novel reveals tensions which Early Graves insufficiently attempts to resolve. Ultimately, the novel tries to cling to whatever conventional normalcy it can but is not entirely successful. In observing how the novel tries, and at times, fails to maintain its conventions, Early Graves reveals patterns of ideological prioritization which evidence both the
limitations of the hard-boiled form and the novel’s attempt to cope with a jarring and tragic change in its world.

II. Methods, Research Questions, and Literature Review

I first situate the “Brandstetter” novels in the context of hard-boiled detective fiction to establish the norms of the genre and series which *Early Graves* later complicates. This project addresses the questions: how are conventions of the hard-boiled detective genre reflected in the “Brandstetter” series, and how do these conventions ideologically uphold patriarchy and systems of state-sanctioned punishment? I explore and expand on Plain’s analysis that the “Brandstetter” novels “push boundaries—but ultimately they do not break or exceed them” (87), in terms of narrative style, systems of punishment, and Plain’s original focus, gender and sexuality. My argument is two-pronged, focusing first on narrative genre conventions and then on the hard-boiled detective protagonist. I define conventional, or “classical” hard-boiled detective fiction as a mystery genre emerging out of pulp magazine serials around the start of the Great Depression, often having a literal style, cyclical crime-and-punishment narrative, and tough-guy detective protagonist. I use the term “hard-boiled” both to reference the sub-genre and the term’s original, colloquial meaning: tough, unsentimental, and cynical. *The Pursuit of Crime: Art and Ideology in Detective Fiction* by Dennis Porter also guides my approach to ideology in detective fiction, especially in suggesting that “detective stories combine what might be called deep ideological constants with surface ideological variables. . . . The former are universal genre characteristics; the latter vary greatly from one cultural tradition to another” (125). Porter discusses genre and sub-genre, which I adapt to discuss hard-boiled fiction and the “Brandstetter” series’ approach to
it. However, I include ideological constants across detective fiction in my analysis of the hard-boiled sub-genre. I consider whether the conventions and variations of the “Brandstetter” series reflect ideological constants or variables, and whether the novels’ more subversive variables truly interrogate either the detective, or the hard-boiled detective genres’ deep ideological frameworks. I ground my argument in structuralist, post-structuralist, Neo-Marxist, and queer theory, informed by Max Horkheimer and Theodor A. Adorno, Judith Butler, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, and Lisa Duggan. I also take a historicist angle in my discussions of detective fiction’s relationship with periods of gender crisis, where I am informed by the scholarship of Erin A. Smith, Jürgen Martschukat, and James Gilbert, among others. I contextualize the “Brandstetter” series in the genre history of hard-boiled fiction by both engaging critical analyses of the genre and the fiction of central figures including Dashiell Hammett, Raymond Chandler, Mickey Spillane, and James M. Cain. I draw especially from Chandler, as, in “Introduction: The Complex History of a ‘Simple Art,’” Miranda A. Hickman suggests Hansen works “in a Chandleresque idiom” (288), and both Hansen and Chandler’s fiction accomplish elements of the hard-boiled genre in a similar fashion. The “Brandstetter” series is not itself considered part of the classical hard-boiled canon, but rather, references a constructed cultural memory of hard-boiled detective fiction. Thus, I explore both primary examples of hard-boiled fiction and subsequent analyses. I also recognize the impact of Hollywood adaptations of well-known detective novels on the cultural memory of the genre; however, I do not explore the cinematic history of hard-boiled detective fiction in detail, considering it outside of the scope of this project.
Next, I engage in a close reading of *Early Graves*, attending to how the novel struggles with its hard-boiled conventions in the context of the AIDS crisis. This project addresses the question: in its struggle and ultimate failure to reconcile the conventions of hard-boiled detective fiction with the stakes of AIDS crisis, what does *Early Graves* reveal about both the genre’s conventions and the novel’s ideological priorities? I divide the conventions I address into narrative—that is, focalization, temporality, and language—and character conventions, focusing on the detective protagonist. I inform my analysis with scholarship regarding narrative representations of disease, specifically HIV/AIDS. These include works by Ronald Bayer, Leo Bersani, Susan Sontag, and Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan. My reading attends carefully to the novel’s conversation with its historical moment, particularly regarding themes of individualism and knowledge. While I do not cite contemporary works of fiction by gay authors about the AIDS crisis, I engaged a number of these works in my background reading to better inform my understanding and interpretation of secondary sources.

In my argument, I make several purposeful choices in my language. First, I avoid the word “homosexual,” which is the typical terminology used in the “Brandstetter” series. According to James Sherman’s “Remembering Joseph Hansen: Father of the Gay Mystery Novel,” Hansen “didn’t fit well into the evolving gay rights movement, preferring the label ‘homosexual’ over ‘gay.’” Hansen typically refers to Brandstetter as “homosexual” or “a homosexual” (*Early* 13) rather than gay, a linguistic choice that is but one sign of a series-wide tension with the Los Angeles gay rights movement of the 1970s and 1980s. While I acknowledge Hansen’s preferred terminology, I have opted to use “gay” as a straightforward, modern term which sounds less clinical. However, I find it appropriate to use “homosexual” in some
instances, especially referring to Hansen’s own identity or where it is important to emphasize Brandstetter or the novel’s distance from any organized gay community or activism. Second, I use the term “naturalistic” to refer to the narrative style of hard-boiled fiction, which emulates and produces a cynical suggestion of reality, but could not aptly be called “realistic,” nor literary realism.¹ I use the word “naturalistic” specifically, as I do not want the hard-boiled narrative style to be confused with the literary naturalism movement. Third, I refer to the hard-boiled detective as “he” because of the normative masculinity central to the character type. The conventional detective centrally and fundamentally embodies, enacts, and upholds patriarchy. Last, while recognizing the medical difference between HIV and AIDS, I typically defer to the latter term when discussing the AIDS epidemic. Both terms would be contemporary to Early Graves, but the novel, like much other writing of the same period, also defers to AIDS over HIV. Similarly, secondary writing about this moment in history often does the same. However, I use both terms purposefully when making distinctions between the virus and set of diagnosable symptoms.

III. The Role of Narrative in Classical Hard-Boiled Detective Fiction

In order to determine how Early Graves complicates the “Brandstetter” series’ engagement with hard-boiled detective fiction, the typical relationship of these novels with detective fiction must be established. The genre’s narrative and structural conventions embody what makes a novel feel hard-boiled and indicate a lineage or relationship with these works. Simultaneously, these structural and narrative conventions embody normative ideologies which

¹ See Hickman’s “Introduction.”
permeate even later genre-critical texts such as the “Brandstetter” novels. Overall, hard-boiled narrative conventions combine to suggest that the pessimistic world of these fictions, comparable to the reader’s reality, is full of corrupt and deviant individuals who should be revealed and removed—either arrested, ostracized, or killed—in order to improve society.

Hard-boiled fiction exhibits a naturalistic, sometimes conversational narrative style which creates social connection with the reader and situates these narratives in their world. The naturalistic narration of hard-boiled fiction is often accomplished through sparse description, use of vernacular, and literal treatment of temporality. A typical example can be found at the end of a chapter in Chandler’s 1940 novel *Farewell, My Lovely*, where protagonist Philip Marlowe leaves a witness’s home and observes

A narrow intent face. . . close to the glass, peering, an old woman’s face. . . . Old Nosey checking up on the neighbors. There was always at least one like her to the block. I waved to her. The curtain fell.

I went back to my car and got into it and drove to the 77th Street Division, and climbed upstairs to Nulty’s smelly little cubbyhole of an office on the second floor. (36) The narration is conversational, cynical, and sarcastic, nicknaming “Old Nosey” and complaining about the smell of Nulty’s office. Marlowe’s casual tone evokes rapport with the imagined reader. Further cementing the identity of this readership, the novel relies on the audience finding stereotypes about older women both believable and comedic. Marlowe also spares little breath for his commute but does not break the flow of time and focalization by including a reference to his drive. In short and quick-paced paperbacks, page-space is a currency best spent on what the audience finds important, so any mention of commuting is sparse, present
only to limit dissonance and construct the detective as an approachable figure. The world built by the narrative style of traditional hard-boiled detective fiction is literal and personal. Thus, the narratives can present their ideologies as realistic and desirable.

Having established the hard-boiled novel’s world as the reader’s, the genre then paints it as broken, and suggests punitive measures to improve it. As described in Chandler’s 1944 essay “The Simple Art of Murder,” here “no man can walk down a dark street in safety because law and order are things we talk about but refrain from practicing…It is not a fragrant world, but it is the world that you live in” (59). Chandler’s description reflects the interpellation accomplished by the hard-boiled narrative style. The pessimistic world of hard-boiled fiction is “ours,” and “we” are the tainted community in need of fixing. Chandler’s world is reflected in the setting of his fiction, but, like many other hard-boiled works, harbors a tension between hopeless pessimism and the heroic individual figure of the detective. Not all detective fiction struggles between cynicism and heroism. Dashiell Hammett’s fiction, rife with bloodthirsty antiheroes, is an exception. In “The Crime of the Sign: Dashiell Hammett’s Detective Fiction,” Carl D. Malmgren writes: “Chandler and other detective writers who followed Hammett were not entirely comfortable with Hammett’s…world in which all values seemed undermined. . . . Chandler himself found a way to counterbalance the situation, to reground the world of detective fiction: in his fiction, the detective is heroized” (375). An entirely pessimistic world risks sewing doubt in the solution provided by the detective. However, a partially pessimistic world identifies a problem and suggests a solution, however incomplete and paradoxical that solution may be to the established logic of the world.
The effect of the partially pessimistic novel is to offer an insufficient, but desirable solution in the form of a crime-and-punishment narrative, reinforcing schemas of social transgression and correction. Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno describe the role of realistic film technology and styling in enforcing ideology in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*: “[T]he more densely and completely [realist film] techniques duplicate empirical objects, the more easily it creates the illusion that the world outside is a seamless extension of the one which has been revealed” (99). Hard-boiled fiction’s naturalistic style insinuates its cynical world is the reader’s, suggesting an immediate need for the punitive solution which the genre proposes.

Detective fiction of almost all subgenres relies on a transgression-and-punishment narrative structure where those who have disturbed the social order are revealed and punished. In “Critical Investigations: Convention and Ideology in Detective Fiction,” William W. Stowe observes this as an act of community curation, using a Communion metaphor. Stowe argues the detective novel “celebrates community by defining it as a relatively innocent ‘we’ over against a clearly guilty other. Like the archetypal comedy, it reestablishes order and harmony by punishing the creators of disorder” (Stowe 574). Stowe’s metaphor offers the Church as an apt example of a powerful sociopolitical ideological structure underpinning social interaction. Often, detective fiction defines the “relatively innocent we” as those whose dominant ideology has been encoded as law and the “clearly guilty other” as social transgressors. The ritually ostracized villains of hard-boiled detective fiction are as often non-white, women, or queer as they are criminals.

Community curation does not inherently abuse the marginalized, but often does so in a genre whose structures protect a dominant ideology which has, historically, enacted marginalization by policing these identities. In *The Pursuit of Crime: Art and Ideology in Detective Fiction*, Dennis Porter writes:
In the beginning of a detective story is a crime that implies both a villain and a victim of villainy, but the action itself always focuses on the acts of a hero who is summoned in order to pursue and punish the villain and . . . restore the status quo ante. . . . The point of view adopted is always that of the detective, which is to say, of the police, however much of an amateur the investigator may appear to be. (125)

Detective fiction is not about solving crimes, nor is it about getting justice for victims and their families. Rather, it valorizes an arm of the police force ritually punishing social transgressions through “pursuit,” which, in the mystery genre, inherently carries an implication of surveillance. Above all else, these fictions enforce schemas which suggest social transgression deserves punishment, first enacted through investigation, then social removal by death or arrest.

IV. Conventional Hard-Boiled Narrative in the “Brandstetter” Series

Though removed from the classical era of hard-boiled detective fiction, Joseph Hansen’s “Dave Brandstetter” series distinctly pulls on these narrative genre conventions. The novels’ opinion of social transgression differs from the classical genre, but the framework of naturalistic style, pessimism, and knowledge-and-punishment narrative remains. The series also expands its conceptualization of punishment to include exposing the secrets—often sexual secrets—of the victims, who are often villains in their own right. The “Brandstetter” series typically replicates the genre’s framework, and while their partial indictment of heteropatriarchy questions hard-boiled conventions, it does not ultimately break their foundational principles.
The “Brandstetter” books offer a similar naturalistic narrative style to the typical hard-boiled genre, with some variation of technique, but the same ultimate goal of constructing a reality in need of punitive correction. In *101 Knights: A Survey of American Detective Fiction 1922-1984*, authors Robert A. Baker and Michael T. Nietzel write: “Hansen ‘jump cuts’ from one scene to another, entering them in the middle and leaving them before they end” (225). Though not stylistically typical of classic hard-boiled detective novels, this effect recalls the style of cinematic realism which Horkheimer and Adorno suggest situates film narratives in the audience’s constructed reality. The brief moments of dissonance between scenes do not offer the same temporal stability as Marlowe’s specified commute, but they create a need for the clarity provided by the detective. The “jump cuts” create further necessity to trust the novels’ symbol of knowledge and implied punishment, if not to identify with him. Though focalized in third person, Brandstetter’s voice still permeates the narrative, inviting association with the detective.

In the 1973 novel *Death Claims*, Brandstetter observes:

> A scatter of old-frame houses edged the sand. . . . They looked bleak in the winter sun. Above the gulls sheared a sky cheerful as new denim. The bay glinted like new tile. . . . It was still bleak. So were the rain-greened hills that shut the place off. He drove out of them bleakly.

> The bleakness was in him. After only three months, he and Doug were coming apart. (1)

As focalized object of narration, Brandstetter’s own “bleakness” tempers the scenic descriptions. Even without the first-person narrative typical of much hard-boiled fiction, Brandstetter’s sway on the narration accomplishes much the same proximity to the protagonist as in the “Marlowe” books. The brief references to his relationships and domestic life scattered throughout the
investigative sections of the novel also serve to humanize and naturalize the narration as much as Marlowe’s quips. Much like the classical genre, the narrative style of the “Brandstetter” series sets the stories in a construction of the reader’s world and encourages the reader to rely on and identify with the focalized symbol of knowledge and punishment.

The “Brandstetter” novels continue to replicate the hard-boiled structure by echoing their pervasive sense of pessimism, often taking the form of political commentary. The series responds to and engages with social issues of recent cultural memory, including homophobia, racism, pollution, LA gang violence, California cults and serial-killings, among others. In The Gay Male Sleuth in Print and Film: A History and Annotated Bibliography, Drewey Wayne Gunn writes that “as post-Vietnam America comes to seem an increasingly unsavory and repulsive environment in which to live, [the “Brandstetter” novels] become progressively grimmer” (15). The series pulls on a wide variety of real-world concerns which cannot realistically be solved by the detective. This is not necessarily at-odds with typical hard-boiled fiction, which never expects to end all theft or murder. Rather, emphasizing the breadth, depth, and variety of social concerns similarly constructs a setting in need of fixing. The pessimism of the “Brandstetter” novels also relies on the pervasiveness of its primary antagonist: the American Dream, which, according to Plain, “could arguably be seen as the master criminal or arch villain of Hansen’s narrative. . . . Irrespective of superficial plot detail, each Brandstetter novel reveals the ideal of the happy, white, heterosexual family to be built upon a web of deceit and denial” (98). This villain cannot be defeated, especially as the “ideal family” is protected by law and dominant ideology more so than the traditional transgressors of classical hard-boiled fiction. The task’s impossibility goes largely unspoken, lest the framework of the detective novel be
interrupted. The “Brandstetter” novels’ solution to the problem of the American Dream is near-identical to the classical model: addressing social issues case-by-case as they appear before the detective.

While the “Brandstetter” series inverts a traditional power dynamic with a gay detective who exposes normative patriarchs, the novels suggest, similarly to classical hard-boiled fiction, that surveillance is a form of punishment which one earns through undesired behavior, including through undesired gender. Much actual punishment of the “Brandstetter” series is posthumous, as the most closely examined characters are often murdered, white patriarchs. In “Rewriting the Masculine Script: The Mystery Novels of Joseph Hansen,” Roger Bromley writes “the death or disappearance of a father, son, or husband is almost always the precipitating moment of the text, as it is in the ‘classic’ mode” (103). Ergo, the character who most often falls under the exposing, disciplinary gaze of the detective is the white American patriarch, the symbol of the novels’ overarching antagonist. Often, the exposure is that of sexual secrets, as in *The Man Everybody Was Afraid Of* (1978), where Ben Orton’s death reveals both his corrupt activity as a police officer and his affair. During the novels, only Brandstetter and confidants learn these secrets. However, they frequently imply the information will cause a social downfall of the victim and their family when, inevitably, others become aware of it. The exposure of heterosexual secrets by a gay detective inverts the traditional framework of queerness falling under the outing, disciplinary gaze of the heteromasculine detective. However, the foundational structure remains: undesired behavior is punished by surveillance and removal from the social sphere. There are still correct and incorrect ways of performing gender, and the novels still punish failed men. The patriarchs are not universally heterosexual—*Gravedigger* (1982) and *Early Graves* (1987) both
feature patriarchs having affairs with other men. The affairs constitute indictments of familial corruption more than the patriarch’s sexuality, especially when compared with the number of unfaithful heterosexual patriarchs in the novels. The “Brandstetter” series spends much more time examining the victims than the killers, who usually appear briefly, and may only be introduced at the end of a novel. While the series condemns transgression of some legal boundaries, much like classical hard-boiled fiction, their primary concern is policing social enactment of sexuality and masculinity. In both senses, the “Brandstetter” novels paint a picture of a realistic world overrun with social, if not always legal, corruption, and propose exposure as a suitable, and deserved punishment.

V. The Character of the Hard-Boiled Detective

In cultural memory, the hard-boiled detective is all but synonymous with its genre. Like narrative conventions, the “Brandstetter” books model this closely. Dave Brandstetter is not just legible as a hard-boiled detective, but nearly typical. Often popular during historical crises of masculinity, the conventional hard-boiled detective both represents and enforces masculine individualism. He also straddles the roles of knowledgeable insider and exceptional outsider who may move among police officers and civilians alike. Traditionally a product of homophobic social pressures, the heteromasculinity of the hard-boiled detective is often destabilized by simultaneous emphasis on homosociality and anxieties around queerness. This section explores the conventional aspects of the detective, including the heteromasculine anxieties which the “Brandstetter” series views as problematic and attempts to fix by redrawing its boundaries of masculinity.
The detective’s ultimate tool is knowledge, which, manifesting in multiple forms, serves to establish the detective as the enforcer of ideologies of gender, individualism, and criminal transgression. Investigative knowing is characterized by some scholars as a gendered act. In “Tracing Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Forensic Detective Fiction,” Joy Palmer summarizes:

“Inheriting a legacy of positivist knowledge, the detective novel is defined by its masculinist drive to know, with the detective functioning as the very epitome of ratiocinative logic. . . . [T]he process of detection and tracing the criminal body is simultaneously a process of ‘feminization’ whereby the body is rendered an object of the scientific gaze.” (56)

The act of knowing does not only punish the antagonist but affirms the detective protagonist’s masculinity. As the individual who reveals transgression, the detective therefore reasserts the normative status quo. Palmer also notes the detective being the “epitome of ratiocinative logic,” describing a status of exceptionality which provides an individualist bent to the cycle of transgression, knowledge, and punishment I describe above. The detective’s exceptionality removes him from association with the often-corrupt officials who lurk in the background of hard-boiled novels, and thus, any environment where he might be forced into compromise or subordination. Even if the detective acts on behalf of larger structures, the character is affirmed and empowered as masculine through the act of knowing, feminizing, and objectifying the othered transgressor. Knowledge also provides the detective mobility through the corrupt and dangerous setting of hard-boiled detective fiction. The hard-boiled detective is street-smart and able to seamlessly navigate the genre’s multiple corrupt spheres without being corrupted himself. In his 1944 essay “The Simple Art of Murder,” Raymond Chandler summarizes the paradoxical
position of the detective: “down those mean streets must go a man who is not himself mean” (59), emphasizing both the detective’s competing statuses as knowledgeable insider and unmarred outsider. Chandler also points to the hard-boiled detective’s status as narrative moral compass, something more typical of Chandler’s fiction than all hard-boiled detective fiction, which further enforces the character’s endorsing embodiment of gazing, both in punitive and masculinist manners.

The hard-boiled detective’s masculine individualism is shaped by the American masculinity crisis of the 1920s to 1950s, where the detective serves as a potentially stabilizing figure of conservative heteromasculinity in the face of changing gender roles. Some scholars, including Jürgen Martschukat, have identified the 1950s postwar masculinity crisis as the culmination of an effect first felt in the Great Depression. In “Men in Gray Flannel Suits: Troubling Masculinities in 1950s America,” Martschukat describes the Great Depression as “when a long process of masculine de-centering began. With . . . unemployment rates of up to 25% of the labor force, the quintessential male stereotype of father and breadwinner was not accomplished by a significant number of men any longer” (10). With the hard-boiled detective novel’s appeal to white working-class men, the masculine-individualist shape of its hero is fundamentally aspirational. The hard-boiled detective, seldom presented in any domestic context, lacks literal patriarchy but assumes a quasi-patriarchal role in his relationship with his city or community. Juxtaposed to the domesticated mode of father-figure shown on 1950s sitcom TV,

2 Chandler’s heroized detective is not the universal approach in hard-boiled fiction, particularly when compared to other influential writers like Dashiell Hammett. In “The Crime of the Sign: Dashiell Hammett’s Detective Fiction,” Carl D. Malmgren writes: “Chandler and other detective writers who followed Hammett were not entirely comfortable with Hammett’s . . . world in which all values seemed undermined. . . . Chandler himself found a way to counterbalance the situation, to reground the world of detective fiction: in his fiction, the detective is heroized” (375). The “Brandstetter” series better fits Chandler’s schema (Hickman 288), and thus, I borrow Chandler’s model when considering the detective’s status as a moral compass.
the hard-boiled detective is a moral authority and source of punishment. He also struggles for control against suspect influences such as the assumed-corrupt government, just as the 1950s patriarchal father was juxtaposed against the nurturing, yet potentially corruptive and queering influence of the mother. Even removed from a domestic context, he emblemizes patriarchal self-determination and masculinity in a period of crisis and uncontrollable change which many felt to be emasculating.3 Even as economic prospects typically improved for white American men into the 1950s, anxieties surrounding masculinity did not decline. In “A Feeling of Crisis: The 1950s” James Gilbert writes that many thought increased opportunities for women would cause “the inevitable decline of true masculinity and individualism and an increase in servility and homosexuality” (69). A sense of individualism and assured heteromasculinity was not only aspirational and reassuring to a generation of men who may have felt economically emasculated, but a sign of successful, acceptable citizenship as individualist, heterosexual Americans. In “The Red Scare’s Lavender Cousin: The Construction of the Cold War Citizen,” David K. Johnson writes: “homosexuality was evidence of the sort of psychological weakness that made one susceptible to communist indoctrination” (187). The hard-boiled detective’s ritual punishment of gender-transgressing men may have been comforting and cathartic, suggesting a feasible action plan against what was seen as a threat both to normalcy and international security. Meanwhile, his presentation as a masculine individualist offered a stabilizing, aspirational embodiment of seemingly threatened dominant ideological structures.

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3For further discussion, see Johnson, John D’Emilio’s “The Homosexual Menace: The Politics of Sexuality in Cold War America,” and Geoffrey S. Smith’s “National Security and Personal Isolation: Sex, Gender, and Disease in the Cold-War United States.”
However, as later referential works like the “Brandstetter” series attempt to solve, some of the hard-boiled conventions which seek to masculinize the detective call into question the stability of his heteromasculinity. The genre’s interest in homosociality and disinterest in subjective women contributes to this destabilization. Bromley suggests hard-boiled fiction frequently centers “the opposition between the centrifugal male orientation with its movement upwards and outwards towards other men, and the centripetal, female orientation, which is the principle of the organization of domestic space” (103). By dichotomizing gender so rigidly, the freedom of the hard-boiled detective becomes relatively rigid, particularly in terms of his relationships with women. The men and women of hard-boiled fiction should fundamentally exist in different spheres with different motivations. Ergo, the hard-boiled detective’s world is entirely homosocial, and the narrative punishment of women who transgress into the active, masculine world suggests a structural defense of homosociality. The embedded threat of same-gender feeling within these dynamics paradoxically undermines the strict heteromasculinity to which the hard-boiled detective novel and its protagonist try to adhere. The hard-boiled detective embodies patriarchy in both his policing of gender transgressors and his rigid performance of heteromasculinity. The characters with whom the hard-boiled detective shares his most intimate relationships are other men, a dynamic which may carry an implicit threat of homosexual panic, particularly to an audience primed to think of queerness as un-American and queer individuals as national security risks, given the popular association between queerness and susceptibility to Communism. These novels attempt to dismiss these threats with a steady flow of short-term female love interests. However, these relationships become meaningless over many novels. Attending to the works of Raymond Chandler, Plain writes: “It is difficult to build a case for Chandler’s female characters as objects of desire. . . . Chandler is the skilled deployer of both the
femme fatale and the deadly innocent, but the depiction of these women is devoid of sensuality” (61). Few hard-boiled detectives marry or sustain any kind of romantic relationship, lest they cede self-determination, particularly to a woman. Those who have married, such as Hammett’s Sam Spade, are often widowers, and similarly juggle short-term undesirable love interests. In rejecting women, the genre’s preoccupation with men is rendered suspect. Furthermore, hard-boiled detectives characterized as vengeful may be emasculated by their acts of passion, even when in service of defending their masculinities. In Gumshoes: A Dictionary of Fictional Detectives, Brunsdale refers to Hammer as “a sadistic and simplistic extreme. In his debut novel I, the Jury (1947), Hammer casually gut-shoots a woman, then as she is dying tells her, ‘It was easy.’ Spillane carried the formula of equal parts vengeance, violence, and sex through an enormously lucrative series” (22). Hammer’s acts of revenge may not re-masculinize the detective as much as emasculate him, as he loses agency to a woman via seduction, then vengeance. In his resulting insecurity, he also loses his masculinized rationality to feminized emotion, no matter how “casually” he accomplishes the revenge. In multiple ways, the traditional hard-boiled detective coexists as an aspirational figure of heteromasculine stability and a figure whose heteromasculinity may become unstable in its extremity.

VI. The “Brandstetter” Series and the Hard-Boiled Detective

As a hard-boiled detective, Brandtstetter is relatively conventional. He possesses and wields multiple types of knowledge, including a social knowledge marked by strategically moving in and out of the closet and capably navigating both straight and gay spheres. Homosexual panic does not undermine his masculinity, which has expanded to ease some of the
paradoxical rigidity of hard-boiled masculine individualism. While Brandstetter destabilizes the genre’s conventions regarding gender and sexuality, the novels construct their own ideal masculinity as a solution to the contradictory and potentially emasculating edges of hard-boiled characterization. Ultimately, they still suggest there are correct and incorrect ways to perform masculinity, and they still punish those who fail. Despite some destabilization, Brandstetter and the typical hard-boiled detective both enact a punitive ideology and enforce a preferred gender presentation.

Like the conventional hard-boiled detective, Brandstetter wields investigative knowledge in a manner which reinforces him as an authoritative figure of masculine individualist ideology. Brandstetter’s investigation of male bodies, while destabilizing, ultimately reinforces a corrective approach to gender presentation. In “Habeas Corpus: Feminism and Detective Fiction,” Kathleen Gregory Klein summarizes that “the victim—or . . . ‘the body’ in the library—is . . . always female” (173). In the “Brandstetter” series, this feminized and objectified role is played by symbols of normative masculinity. Thus, the body of the impenetrable, subjectified white American patriarch becomes destabilized, a site that is multiply penetrated—by his killer, by death, and by the masculinist gaze of the detective. Brandstetter’s surveilling punishment re-enacts the conventional detective novel’s punitive approach to gender transgression. While the roles are changed, this nonetheless reinforces the hard-boiled ideological constant that gender should be policed. For the “Brandstetter” novels, “proper” masculinity belongs in a position of power and should be reinforced by ostracizing and punishing undesired genders. The novels espouse a pervasive sexism in which the feminine becomes synonymous with debasement, shame, and punishment. Plain writes: “In the world of Dave Brandstetter, women simply do not
signify. . . . it represents marginality at its most extreme and most evasive—the marginality of invisibility” (101). The failed men of the “Brandstetter” series, especially victimized patriarchs and their murderers, are removed from the narrative by death or arrest and thus, relegated to the undesired realm of the feminine. Policing normative masculinity inverts the genre’s conventional schemas around gender, but nonetheless suggests the novels are oriented to defend and uphold patriarchy, albeit one with a broader definition. As detective, Brandstetter enacts this schema, completing these figures’ emasculation by gazing at them, an act which constructs Brandstetter’s espoused masculinity as superior to that of the novels’ murderers and victims. Brandstetter moves these figures to a sphere of femininity to punish them, revealing their masculinity as mutable and weak in comparison to his stable, superior form of patriarchy. The series does not question patriarchy so much as it replaces one form with another.

Furthermore, Brandstetter possesses a masculinizing individuality allowed by his multiple insider and outsider statuses to systems of gender and justice. Plain writes that Brandstetter “is not above passing himself if it will gain him information, and with his well-heeled appearance, the role of all-American male is easily assumed” (107). Appearing normatively masculine, wealthy, and white, Brandstetter passes strategically, and in doing so, renders his body unreadable. The novels typically side-step questions of passing for safety, as Brandstetter seldom experiences any overt homophobia in the novels and is typically unscathed when he does (Skinflick 36). As exceptional knower, he may read the bodies of others, but may not be emasculated and objectified in the same manner himself. His appearance also allows him fluent passage within white heteropatriarchy, which often replaces or joins Chandler’s “mean streets” (“Simple Art” 59) in the series. These normative men often mistake Brandstetter for one
of their own, including an Evangelical pastor in *Skinflick* who assumes Brandstetter is sympathetic to his church’s bigotry towards local gay bars (22-23). Therefore, Brandstetter is allowed the power and privilege of insider knowledge without having his morality, and thus, the novel’s ideological variables, compromised by his association with the undesirable group. Brandstetter similarly navigates police and queer spheres as an unmarred outsider, able to benefit from these connections without compromising his individuality with allegiance to a bureaucratic system or political body. Several officer characters recur throughout the novels from different sheriff and police departments. Brandstetter openly relies on these connections, never acting “on his own, except when [Sheriff’s Lieutenant] Salazar or Ken Barker of LAPD couldn’t or wouldn’t help” (*Nightwork* 120). However, Brandstetter does not sacrifice any independence from working within police bureaucracy, nor by having a boss. Even before leaving Medallion Life Insurance to work independently, Brandstetter is never shown taking orders or compromising with others. Meanwhile, Brandstetter’s network of gay friends—most middle-aged, middle-class professionals—similarly provides Brandstetter with insider knowledge and access to a community without the individual sacrifice of belonging to one. Bromley writes: “Brandstetter identifies with gay people, but never in any active or militant sense; the primary bond is that produced by the individual network” (111). In this way, Brandstetter’s relationship with other gay people and the police is roughly parallel. The “Brandstetter” series’ primary suspicion regards organizations and the loss of individualism they imply, and thus minimizes any relationship which may jeopardize Brandstetter’s role as masculine individualist. The novels’ recurring minor characters serve only to increase Brandstetter’s resources of social knowledge and agency.
Both Brandstetter and the conventional hard-boiled detective reinforce forms of patriarchy, though the patriarchal interests of the “Brandstetter” novels include both homosociality and homoeroticism. Plain identifies quasi-paternal mentorship as the novels’ preferred romantic relationship dynamic, writing that “[t]he adoption of a boy. . . is indicative of responsibility. The older man selects a boy who will himself become a worthy inheritor of the patriarchal mantle” (Plain 115) by learning industriousness, self-sufficiency, and other aspects of masculine individualism.\(^4\) Perhaps mirroring a father-son relationship more than husband-wife, this dynamic preserves and upholds masculinity in a place of power over femininity, thus reworking and maintaining the same patriarchal structures which the series criticizes in other contexts. While familial structures including and upholding queerness subvert the heteronormative family, the model proposed in the “Brandstetter” novels reinforces a kind of masculinity that is not terribly far from heteropatriarchy. Instead of being places of homosocial anxiety where same-gender feeling undermines hard-boiled masculinity, as male-male dynamics do in traditional hard-boiled fiction, these dynamics reshape intimacy between men, reinforcing rather than undermining masculinity’s centrality. Similarly, romance in the “Brandstetter” series is no longer a place of anxiety, as femininity no longer threatens masculine agency over the domestic sphere. The domestic sphere has been reordered in favor of masculine conservation and bonding. Domesticity, like romance, has been redefined with masculinity at its center. Successful men are portrayed in the home, in intimate relationships, and performing domestic labor, which is not only permissible, but expected. In *Skinflick*, Brandstetter serves as a masculine mentor for

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\(^4\) Hansen’s “boy/man” terminology, used by Plain, is rendered somewhat problematic by Brandstetter’s relationship with a much younger black man, Cecil Harris. In the intersection of both black and gay identity, the term, as Plain notes, “mutates into a painful reminder of historical trauma” (111). The novels use the word “boy” broadly enough to suggest the lines of “boy/man” are not defined by race alone, though in interracial iterations of these dynamics, the series never portrays white men as the “boys.” For the sake of clarity, I borrow the language used by both Hansen and Plain, but recognize it raises questions about the treatment of race in the “Brandstetter” novels which are outside the scope of this project.
recently divorced Johnny Delgado, who Brandstetter chastises for Delgado’s inability to do dishes alone: “You don’t know how to be a cleaning woman. Those have to be rinsed, first. [Your ex-wife] spoiled you. And your mother before her, I expect” (147). Delgado has transgressed against the novels’ preferred homosocial masculine individualism by relying on women and is thus unable to fully support himself—meaning both economic self-sufficiency and domestic self-sufficiency in these novels. Delgado’s divorce further insinuates domestic failure. Brandstetter mentors Delgado, albeit scathingly, in one of the only books where Brandstetter is not in a long-term monogamous relationship himself. When domesticity and mentorship are not accessible in a romantic context, the novels locate them elsewhere so that these forces can continue to uphold the protagonist’s masculinity. Rather than the traditional hard-boiled approach of decentering the domestic sphere to avoid ceding any power to women, the “Brandstetter” series masculinizes traditionally feminine labor, creating a system in which “the female is rendered redundant” (Plain 115). With these romantic and domestic expectations, the “Brandstetter” series revises the very areas that, in classical hard-boiled literature, would be sites of anxious masculinity; in these books, these same sites reinforce Brandstetter as a preferable and more stable figure, less beholden to homosexual panic. In doing so, the novels enforce a kind of queer patriarchy which alters the signifiers of the detective novel’s deeper gender ideology but does not challenge it.

The “Brandstetter” novels mute the potentially destabilizing effects of Brandstetter’s sexuality by repeatedly reinforcing his masculine individualism, endorsing gender roles in a similar manner to typical hard-boiled fiction. The threat of homophobia lingers only in the background of the “Brandstetter” series, and at times, serves to further promote Brandstetter’s
image of masculinity as preferable. One of these few examples is in *Skinflick*, when Brandstetter explains his departure from his father’s insurance company to his stepmother:

“I got out of there before they threw me out,” he said. “With no time to spare. Walking through that tenth floor the day after he died was like swimming through a school of great white sharks. Vice presidents.”

She peered at him. . . . “Why would they throw you out?”

“Bad employment risk.” He tilted up the glass and let the ice rattle against his mouth. “Untrustworthy.” (36)

Rather than emasculating him or rendering him vulnerable, Brandstetter’s departure from Medallion reinforces his masculine individualism. Brandstetter describes the vice presidents as bloodthirsty, id-driven animals, highlighting their lack of individuality by describing them as in a “school.” Brandstetter, by comparison, embodies cool, masculine rationality. Leaving of his own accord to found a private practice, Brandstetter remains far removed from bureaucracy, compromise, or subordination to others, unlike the company officials. The homophobes’ bigotry emasculates them, whereas Brandstetter escapes unscathed. In specifically criticizing bigotry, the “Brandstetter” series presents itself as more masculine than conventional hard-boiled detective fiction, having rid the series of the insecurity of homosexual panic which underlies much of the classical genre and solved the problem of hard-boiled homosociality. Just as the hard-boiled detective simultaneously distances and participates in systems of crime and punishment, Brandstetter participates in the system he punitively observes. Plain writes:

The central paradox of the Brandstetter novels thus resides. . . in the duality of Dave’s position. Although his sexuality remains stigmatized. . . Dave cannot plausibly be read as excluded other. The job at Medallion Life symbolises his acceptance by his father, and. . .
his economic status in turn ensures his acceptance by the conceptual father of patriarchal society. (108)

The attempts to distance Brandstetter from these ideologies serve to establish his mode of justice, masculinity, and individualism as a superior one without fundamentally challenging the ideological constants of detective fiction. Brandstetter is not “excluded other” so much as removed, valorized individualist. The novels’ desire to constantly prove Brandstetter’s masculinity as unquestionable suggests the series shares the same “role and performance anxieties” (Bromley 115) which they criticize in normative heteromasculinity, and by extent, traditional hard-boiled fiction, an instability which is especially revealed and challenged in *Early Graves*.

**VII. The Limits of Hard-Boiled Narrative Conventions in *Early Graves***

While the “Brandstetter” series generally adheres to hard-boiled conventions, the ninth novel, *Early Graves* (1987), struggles to reconcile these with the then-ongoing AIDS crisis. The novel follows Brandstetter, now in his sixties, attempting to solve Drew Dodge’s murder after Dodge’s body was dumped in Brandstetter’s front yard. Dodge is also believed to be the victim of Leonard Lynn Church, a serial killer targeting gay men dying of AIDS, though further investigation reveals Dodge’s killer to be the son he abandoned decades prior, Cary Dean Duval. Brandstetter successfully solves the murder, and the killer is arrested, but not without casualties—Duval stabs Brandstetter and endangers the lives of several other recurring characters. The novel often bends or temporarily breaks the conventions familiar to the series—especially narration, time, and structures of crime and punishment. However, its subversions are
often uncertain and incomplete, torn between desires to depict the stakes of the AIDS crisis and lean on the security of normalcy. *Early Graves* is unable to reconcile narrative constants of reality and knowledge with a mass tragedy and lack of immediate solutions. The novel’s sense of the world, its stability, and its ability to be controlled by the knowledge of an individual is irreparably altered, even though the novel tries to maintain its form.

Notably, *Early Graves* departs from the series’ literal narrative style with an uncertain, incomplete metaphorical comparison between Brandstetter’s various health issues and depictions of AIDS. The novel attempts to use Brandstetter’s health as a means to discuss symptoms of AIDS without actually depicting the syndrome itself. First, his health complications result from a penetration, a parallel with the common transmission of AIDS through needles or sex. Brandstetter’s unexpected anaphylactic reaction to the antibiotics he was prescribed in case “infection developed, fever, who knew what complications” (59, emphasis mine) also aligns with the novel’s criticisms of early use of AZT for AIDS patients, which Brandstetter voices: “You have to have your blood replaced every three weeks. AIDS doesn’t kill you—anemia does” (89). Brandstetter’s allergic reaction to a medication prescribed to prevent “infection” or “who knew what complications” recalls contemporary anxieties over the limitations of medical knowledge about and potential treatments for AIDS. Repeatedly, the novel borrows the language of the AIDS crisis out of its immediate context, including a conversation with a doctor when Brandstetter asks why he is in the hospital:

> “Anaphylactic reaction.” Now a young man in white bent over him. . . . He smelled of vitamin B. “To antibiotics. You didn’t warn the emergency room staff.”

> “It never happened before,” Dave said. “I didn’t know.”
“Well, now we all know.” The doctor grinned. “And it won’t happen again, will it?” (69)

The conversation is uncomfortable, with the doctor looming close enough to smell and joking about his patient’s near-death. Chastising and blaming Brandstetter for his own condition, the doctor’s “we all know now” bears the weight of a threatening medical secret. Keeping in mind that Brandstetter was stabbed with the same knife used to murder Dodge, who had AIDS, the doctor’s words especially echo the ostracization of AIDS patients and paranoia around HIV in medical settings that were especially pronounced in the early years of the epidemic. In And the Band Played On, Randy Shilts illustrates a moment medical discrimination around AIDS in 1983: “Among AIDS groups in Manhattan, word spread that nurses were similarly refusing to treat some people with AIDS, although New York hospitals did not see the problem as serious enough to warrant dismissal” (322). The out-of-place shaming towards Brandstetter’s allergy, as well as the uncomfortable weight given to the hospital staff’s knowledge of it echoes these forms of medical discrimination, though the novel does not enact any greater ramifications. It only echoes the language of these moments, again evoking AIDS imagery without ever depicting the illness. The series never addresses the threat of transmission from Brandstetter’s stabbing, instead relying on ambiguous parallels between Brandstetter’s experiences and the social and medical treatment of AIDS patients. In repeatedly referencing the AIDS crisis from a contextual distance, Early Graves attempts to address AIDS without ever depicting it, lest the threat it poses become any more real. Addressing AIDS head-on would mean threats to agency, narrative stability, and the impermeable masculinity thus far proposed by the novels. While many moments where the novel stretches or breaks its narrative conventions are explicitly tied to
AIDS, many others are tied to these echoing moments surrounding Brandstetter’s injury and ensuing anaphylaxis.

*Early Graves* also evidences competing desires to depict the destabilizing effects of the AIDS crisis and to cling to normalcy and typical ideology through its approach to narrative conventions, especially regarding time and naturalistic style. The “jump cuts” are more extreme than in other novels, including a noteworthy example when Brandstetter, poorly recovering from the stab wound, has a mid-scene anaphylactic reaction to his medications:

“You look like you don’t feel so good,” Samuels said.

“That is the understatement of the week,” Dave said.

They had moved him. This was a different room. That was all he knew. Not even if it was day or night. He seemed to see the rainy rectangle of a window sometimes, sometimes the glare of fluorescents. . . . Once he had a wide-angle vision of a white room, one wallpapered. *See that wallpaper? Billy’s hand. He loved things to be pretty.* A dark face bent over him. “Dixon?” Dave said, but it wasn’t Dixon. . . . Then everything was nothing for a long time. Or what seemed a long time. . . .

Amanda stood by the bed. . . . Then he was riding through the rain in the unmarked police car driven by Samuels. He was gasping for breath. He was very sick.

(67)

As I outline above, Brandstetter’s health complications are a place where the novel comments about and draws parallels to AIDS from a distance. Brandstetter’s misrecognition of time, place, and individuals echoes AIDS-related dementia, but, like many other instances which parallel his
health conditions with AIDS, the effects are brief. The usual effect of naturalistic storytelling in hard-boiled fiction is to ground the narrative and its ideologies in a sense of reality, which has now been jarred. The passage abandons the novel’s typical linear narrative and singular narrative voice, including flashbacks and pieces of dialogue from former scenes. It also becomes challenging to follow time and space; Brandstetter seems to move back and forth from many locations, and in no clear order. Over the next several paragraphs, Brandstetter seems to awaken several times, but remains confused and unsure of his surroundings (68-69), meaning that, while the section is clearly temporary, it is challenging to discern where it truly ends. The destabilization is temporary, suggesting hesitancy to depart from conventional forms of storytelling, especially when much of the ideological work of the detective novel is accomplished by naturalistic storytelling. Detective fiction’s interest in crime and punishment requires the narrative to be literal, as investigative knowledge is constructed through empirical deduction. Meanwhile, detective fiction’s interest in patriarchy requires the world to be ordered through masculinist types of knowledge, particularly ratiocination. However, the effect is nonetheless jarring, suggesting the literal, “real” world of the novel has been shaken, falling out of order. Even if the narrative recovers, normalcy has been rendered terrifyingly mutable. This fictional world has slipped out of the narrative’s control, and thus, the real world has slipped out of the reader’s. By experimenting with narrative subversion, Early Graves depicts the feeling of one’s world falling apart, but only to a short extent before it risks disturbing its deeply held conventional ideologies. The novel experiments with narrative changes further, but only briefly. A later chapter consists of a first-person confession by Church explaining his life’s story and motive (105-113). However, the story is italicized to set it off from the rest of the novel. The section even opens with the orienting line “My name is Leonard Lynn Church” (105). The
sudden shift in narrative style—although more muted than the first—is an aftershock, suggesting that not only one individual’s sense of reality has been shaken, but that the world itself has become less stable. The change in narration only lasts one chapter, and ultimately, the novel returns to a normalcy which, while briefly threatened, is not interrogated or deconstructed. The novel thus both includes and simultaneously decentralizes fundamental changes in the depiction and feeling of reality, a tension that reflecting its competing desires to depict the scope and seriousness of the AIDS crisis, in all its world-upending terror for gay men in the 1980s, and to uphold the fundamental ideologies of detective fiction.

Furthermore, AIDS disrupts the novels’ schemas of knowledge and punishment, rendering knowledge unattainable and punishment ineffective. *Early Graves* flounders in a circumstance where knowing will not result in a solution. Stowe observes that the “truth in [detective] novels may be elusive, but it is knowable and always worth knowing” (570). In *Early Graves*, the Brandstetter can act, but not in a way which affects the AIDS crisis, the larger, implied antagonist of the novel. While both killers—Church and Duval—are caught, Church’s death is a grotesque, sensational media spectacle at a bathhouse (104) which risks worsening public perception of gay men with AIDS, while Duval’s case is an act of interpersonal revenge with no relationship to the AIDS crisis (180). Brandstetter tries to follow the AIDS crisis like its own case, keeping “a file drawer filled with. . . grim reading matter up in the canyon [at his home]. Labeled, dated, tucked in manila envelopes. The news kept changing” (37). However, AIDS is an antagonist that Brandstetter cannot control just by knowing more about it—in fact, he cannot control it at all. *Early Graves* still holds the acquisition of knowledge as a possible solution to certain problems, including Dodge’s murder, but it is no longer ideal, considering the
unusual number of casualties throughout the case. In “What Can Narrative Theory Learn From Illness Narratives?,” Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan writes: “Both the onset of illness and the various phases of its trajectory are experienced . . . as random, unforeseeable, uncontrollable, the very opposite of lawlike regularity. Accidents, rather than order, prevail. Disruption is the rule rather than the exception” (243). In a genre such as detective fiction, one structured to uphold “lawlike regularity,” disease stretches and threatens to break this framework. While Early Graves tries to uphold the narrative structure familiar to the series and its genre, its ruptures implicitly concede that the AIDS crisis is not something an individual can defeat, especially as the knowledge required did not yet exist. In other works in the series, the American Dream, however pervasive, never outmatches the “Brandstetter” novels’ approach to crime and punishment. However, AIDS is a much more immediate, physical, and personal threat which cannot feasibly be treated in the same manner. An individual cannot logically know his way out of an epidemic and should not try at such risk.

VIII. Early Graves and the Hard-Boiled Detective

The detective himself is another site where Early Graves attempts to negotiate the tension between preserving and subverting hard-boiled genre conventions. Early Graves upends conventions relating to the detective at times while preserving aspects of the hard-boiled detective at others. The novel is not able to maintain certain aspects of individualism, especially pertaining to the potential collateral damage of the detective’s actions. The detective is also no longer able to serve as the novel’s locus of knowledge. However, it attempts to cling to others, especially agency, self-determination, and masculinity. While the AIDS crisis threatens the
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novel’s conceptualizations of gender, particularly individualism and gay patriarchy, *Early Graves* ultimately attempts to uphold its schemas of masculinity any way it can. In essence, the novel gives up the conventions it cannot bring itself to logically or ethically espouse during an epidemic but attempts to maintain those most threatened by disease itself. The novel’s re-characterization of hard-boiled conventions suggests an ideological priority of self-preservation and domesticity over work and fruitless sacrifice, evidenced by the novel’s assertion that the valorized, investigative individual can no longer function in the stakes of the AIDS crisis, while ultimately defending domestic masculine individualism.

In *Early Graves*, the detective is still a center of knowledge, but the novel creates an environment which challenges his ability to act upon it. Brandstetter ultimately solves the novel’s mystery, but along the way he trips over police officers, journalists, doctors, and a misled public. Law enforcement, while somewhat suspect, are often helpfully involved in Brandstetter’s cases. In *Early Graves*, however, the LAPD actively impedes Brandstetter, repeatedly publicizing conflicting and inaccurate information which puts Brandstetter and his investigation at risk:

“The kid is going to keep trying to kill you,” [Lieutenant] Leppard said. “He won’t believe for a minute we’ve settled on Church as the one who stabbed Dodge and attacked you. We released his description. . . We wanted the public’s help. . . .”

“Then you shouldn’t have let Church’s picture out.” (114)

The LAPD’s presence in the case does not impede Brandstetter’s status as the exceptional knower, but their releasing conflicting and jeopardizing information to the public lessens Brandstetter’s control of knowledge. While Brandstetter manages to solve the mystery, the
LAPD’s misstep results in the near-death of his friend, Tom Owens. The novel still desires the model of an individual detective enacting punishment via knowledge, preferring Brandstetter’s approach over Leppard’s. However, the novel’s larger environment—one of deadly misinformation and government carelessness—makes this model of knowledge and punishment barely functional. The mishandling of the novel’s case parallels abuses by the government and media which actively impeded AIDS research and worsened conditions for people with AIDS. For example, in the 1987 article “Is the Rectum a Grave?” Leo Bersani writes: “It was, after all, the Justice Department of the United States that issued a legal opinion stating that employers could fire employees with AIDS if they had so much as the suspicion that the virus could be spread to other workers, regardless of medical evidence” (201). Bersani’s example stresses the government’s enabling and amplifying potentially deadly misinformation and is one of many Bersani lists in the opening pages of his argument echoing this reality (199-201). While Early Graves is slow to turn against established systems of law enforcement, the novel depicts deadly situations where reckless, careless, and potentially malicious forces beyond the individual’s control have the most, and most tragically consequential control. The novel is reluctant to give up its knowledge-punishment schema and reconciles this by keeping the scale of Dodge’s case intimate—within the family, as is often traditional in hard-boiled fiction. Thus, there is still a place for exceptional knowers where Brandstetter is not entirely helpless, though that place is smaller than before.

No longer the individual locus of knowledge, Brandstetter also becomes subject to investigative gazing from others when he is stabbed by Duval, upsetting the typical schema of the detective as penetrative, masculinized knower and the body as an exposed, penetrated object.
The gazes on Brandstetter also multiply, coming to include doctors, police officers, and the public, who are aware of the case. Furthermore, Brandstetter’s exposure is especially unconventional because it comes at a moment of vulnerability: first stabbing, then unexpected illness. Brandstetter’s injury in *Early Graves* is unusually disabling for both the genre and series. He must rely on friends and family to help with the case and typically simple domestic tasks, such as cooking and dressing (56). His injury is one of few, if any, which are severe enough to be mentioned in later novels, including the subsequent *Obedience*, where long-term pain causes him mobility issues (22). In hard-boiled fiction, the detective may be injured, but seldom with any consequence, lest the novel linger on his potential weakness, penetrability, or compromised self-sufficiency. In *Early Graves*, unmooring questions of change and death underlie Brandstetter’s injury, as do threats of emasculation and lessened agency. Within the context of the AIDS epidemic, Brandstetter’s injury and illness stand out, particularly because their narrative parallels to AIDS and related complications suggest the potential for much more permanent and dire threats than a temporary injury. However, the novel keeps the risk of Brandstetter’s having contracted HIV at an arm’s length. After being stabbed, Brandstetter “lay in a puddle the wrong color for rain” (53). The narration side-steps questions of transmission by refusing to name Brandstetter’s blood as blood: it is simply a puddle of the wrong color. Brandstetter repeatedly tells other characters he does not have AIDS, but the moments are presented as to subtly call this into question. One uses a double negative (66), while another is followed by another character’s reply, “Yeah, right” (55), which may imply either confirmation or incredulity, and lacks contextual clarification. Brandstetter’s objectification disturbs the novel’s order, but only briefly. In time, Brandstetter will return to subjective knower, rather than incorrectly-known object, though this convention’s stability has been shaken—Brandstetter's investigative gaze conflicts
with the suspect medical gaze which backgrounds much of the novel. The kind of world-solving investigation formerly done by the detective is now in the hands of doctors and epidemiologists, who alone may accurately gaze at the detective, the dethroned locus of knowledge. The detective is no longer impenetrable, and his exceptionality is limited to a smaller subject than the one Brandstetter implicitly wishes to address. The transition from detective to doctor feels uncertain—the novel features both benevolent medical professionals like Doctor Patel and suspect ones, like the unnamed doctor who mocks Brandstetter after his anaphylaxis. Nonetheless, the novel concedes that these figures have greater access to knowledge than Brandstetter. In an epidemic, individual, investigative pursuit is futile, and risks harm to one’s physical and social body. Brandstetter, like countless others, is now at the mercy of epidemiologists.

The novel’s anxieties over its genre’s idealization of the individual hero leads *Early Graves* to create a division between public-facing individualism, which the novel questions, and private-sphere individualism, which it maintains as a possible place of refuge. For the novel, public-facing individualism especially concerns Brandstetter’s detective work, movement through professional worlds, and interaction with law enforcement and bystanders. Meanwhile, private-sphere individualism regards self-determination and agency, especially as they appear in domestic contexts. The novel recharacterizes Brandstetter’s public-facing individualism as an undesirable “risk behavior,” which helps to solve the case, but not without creating risk to others. The language used to describe Brandstetter’s investigations, such as “going out” (56), “[coming] out” (64) or “[putting] yourself out on the streets” (68) echoes language often used to describe socializing or sexual behavior that was used to blame those who contracted HIV for their
condition, especially as Brandstetter’s behaviors are tied to risks of bodily harm, and specifically, hospitalization. One friend chastises him: “Let the police handle it. . . . You’ll end up in the hospital again” (86). Brandstetter’s retirement is similarly associated with fears of a changed world where the hard-boiled detective’s individualist solution no longer works, especially the worry that Brandstetter and bystanders alike will be harmed if he continues: “’I’m retiring. . . . I’m fed up with hospitals. . . . The world is getting meaner by the week. And I’m not quick enough anymore.’ Dave told [Owens] about the shooting at Haven House” (128), referencing Detective Samuels, an officer who was nearly killed while attempting to protect Brandstetter. In other novels, Brandstetter’s investigations seldom cause casualties for anyone but himself. In Early Graves, his individualism has ramifications; the novel ensures this is understood, painstakingly describing Samuels’ wife and young child (96). Rather than being an admirable, heroic trait, Brandstetter’s desire to individually solve mysteries is recharacterized as a death wish for himself and innocent others, paralleled to those who continued having unsafe sex despite the ongoing AIDS epidemic. Investigation by itself is no longer heroic, especially as the detective’s former domain, the public sphere, has entirely changed. Initially written in the late 1960s, Brandstetter’s characterization as a self-determining individualist is reflective of gay politics around bodily autonomy and sexual liberation contemporary to the period, though the novels’ distancing explicit sexuality suggests Brandstetter’s characterization is more interested in autonomy and individualism than identifying with political organizing around sexual liberation. However, in “AIDS and the Bathhouse Controversy,” Ronald Bayer links the “radical, almost asocial individualism” (473) which characterized some of the gay political rhetoric against government regulations to limit the spread of AIDS to a “defense of privacy [that had become] a central feature of gay political ideology” (471) decades earlier. Brandstetter’s individualism and
outsider status reflect older systems of politics—especially sexual individualism—which many saw as needing to adapt to AIDS crisis. *Early Graves* does not wholly reject individualism, but rather, alters its structures to avoid supporting kinds of individualism it sees as irresponsible in an epidemic. Nonetheless, the novel continues to maintain and uphold domestic masculine individualism, even if it can no longer reconcile its conceptualization of public individualism with the stakes of an epidemic.

Brandstetter’s masculine individualism is threatened, but ultimately preserved, especially when Brandstetter is stabbed. The injury threatens emasculation—physically, medically, and deductively, his body is penetrated, and Brandstetter temporarily occupies the role of victim, which is traditionally feminized in detective fiction. The stabbing also raises the threat of Brandstetter contracting HIV, and temporarily renders him helpless as he recovers from his reaction to his antibiotics. Much of the novel leaves the perpetrator ambiguous, entertaining the assumption that Brandstetter has been stabbed by a serial killer. Beyond the abnormality of a serial killer in a hard-boiled novel, there is a cultural understanding of emasculation and objectification tied with being the victim of a serial killer. Plain describes the serial-killer narrative as having an “emphasis on murder as an enactment of sexual gratification” (227). Victimization by a serial killer implies having been objectified for the pleasure of another, rather than as a result of interpersonal conflict, as is typically the case in mystery fiction. The act is dehumanizing, rendering the individual biological rather than anthropological, or, to borrow Plain’s metaphor, meat, rather than flesh (232). Brandstetter is ultimately spared this dehumanization, as Duval’s attempt to murder him is later revealed as personal. This also distances possible symbolic parallels with AIDS, as Brandstetter’s health issues would link back
to an act of sexual gratification. *Early Graves* temporarily entertains these notions, leaving the unmooring implications of objectification, emasculation, and disease incomplete, haunting the background of the novel. At times, the novel is forced to concede that its initial conceptualization of individualism cannot functionally coexist with the environment of an epidemic. At other times such as these, private-sphere individualism—including self-determination, agency, and subjectivity—must be narratively protected. The novel sees the loss of public-sphere individualism as a responsible civic sacrifice made during times of crisis. Meanwhile, the novel sees the loss of private-sphere individualism as a loss of what, for the “Brandstetter” series, constitutes personhood: agency, self-determination, and as much individual control as possible. One is a necessary sacrifice, while the other constitutes a terrifying dehumanization associated with disease. In short, public-sphere individualism is threatened by the AIDS epidemic, while private-sphere individualism is threatened by AIDS.

Ultimately, Brandstetter’s retirement prioritizes self-preservation through a retreat to the domestic sphere, suggesting a greater interest in maintaining masculine individualist ideologies than crime-and-punishment ones. As is the case for many other near subversions in *Early Graves*, the preservation of the novels’ model of patriarchy is framed as a threat which never carries through. Plain writes that the novels’ mentoral relationship dynamic “is brutally disrupted by AIDS. . . A generation has been lost and the values of a particular mode of patriarchal gentility seem increasingly threatened by the modern world” (103). The destabilization of the novel’s gender dynamic is a source of tension in *Early Graves*, where Brandstetter’s own relationship is temporarily fractured—in a botched attempt to protect a seventeen-year-old girl from her abusive mother’s custody, Harris marries her, and refuses to leave her because he
believes she is love with him. Other characters in relationships with similar “boy/man” dynamics voice vague worries about the world’s threatening nature, though the novel does not name that threat as AIDS. Tom Owens claims his younger lover, Larry Johns wants “not ever to have to leave [home]. . . . Worse than that, he’d rather I stayed home, never went anyplace” (127). The domestic sphere, formerly a stable place of masculine security, is no longer guaranteed. These tensions between a desire for and doubt in coupled monogamy echo the simultaneous contradicting views of monogamy as safe, yet uncertain during the AIDS crisis. Brandstetter’s retirement at the end of the novel echoes some of Johns’ fears. When explaining his retirement to Owens, Brandstetter says “I don’t want to die on some rainy sidewalk. I want to die in bed. With Cecil holding onto me” (129). Brandstetter does not think of his retirement in terms of how he would like to live, but how he would like to die, suggesting he, like Johns, doubts the permanent stability of coupled domesticity. Much like the scenes of Brandstetter in the hospital, the moment echoes narratives about the AIDS crisis from those most intimately impacted. Death at home, as opposed to a more violent, dehumanizing place—potentially referencing medical discrimination—evokes the imagery of what, for many, was a more desirable death: in a familiar place among loved ones, particularly one’s romantic partner or chosen family who might not be allowed in a hospital room. Even if unspoken in the text of the novel, the threat haunting these relationship dynamics is the AIDS crisis, which the characters aptly fear and grieve. However, Brandstetter’s retirement is still ultimately hopeful, as he decides to mend his relationship with Harris: “Dave laughed. . . . To the beat of their heels. . . . he almost started whistling in the rain” (184). *Early Graves* does not try to debate that domesticity is now uncertain, but rather, depicts competing senses of hopelessness and unsteady faith in domesticity as a refuge. Dread still permeates coupled domesticity, but the novel sees it as nonetheless important to pursue. The
novel wants to preserve the masculinizing dynamic depicted in the domestic sphere, especially by preserving self-reliance, subjectivity, and agency—ultimately, the hard-boiled conventions which are most threatened by AIDS.

**IX. Implications for Further Research**

The “Brandstetter” novels, as well as other contemporary gay detective novels which respond to the AIDS crisis, are worthy of further critical investigation than allowed by the scope of this project. *Early Graves* alone has ample room for further analysis, particularly with closer historical attention to Los Angeles in 1987, or in conversation with representation of AIDS to a potentially straight readership. *Early Graves* might also be explored in conversation with other contemporary gay, California-set detective novels in which the AIDS crisis plays a role, notably Michael Nava’s “Henry Rios” series. As Garth Greenwell has suggested, the “Rios” series also destabilizes and breaks conventions of detective fiction. A comparative analysis, while outside the scope of this project, could be a rich and interesting area to explore. This project follows a text-based, rather than multimedia approach to hard-boiled detective fiction. There is ample room to analyze the “Brandstetter” series in conversation with hard-boiled Hollywood film adaptations, both during the classical era and in referential neo-noirs contemporary to the novels, including *The Long Goodbye* (1973), *The Big Sleep* (1978), and *Blade Runner* (1982). I also framed my analysis entirely within the context of hard-boiled fiction, rather than approaching the series, as some have, as police procedurals. By reading the “Brandstetter” series in terms of their engagement with hard-boiled detective fiction, I have been able to examine their complicated relationships with the traditional structures of masculinity central to that genre. However, an
analysis of these novels with respect to the conventions of police procedural fiction might reveal different aspects in these works that are rich and interesting.

Brandstetter’s relationship with Cecil Harris might be another rich area of the text to engage. Above, I briefly touch on their being both an interracial and intergenerational couple, but their relationship dynamic raises further questions about the novels’ conceptualization of masculinity, sexuality, race, and power which would be enlightening to explore. Brandstetter, who is white, wealthy, and nearly forty years Harris’s senior gains access to aspects of black communities and culture through their relationship, thus expanding his network of accepted spheres and bolstering his investigative capabilities. Meanwhile, Harris’s masculine education involves increasingly acting as caretaker and homemaker for Brandstetter as he ages, though curiously, Brandstetter’s sudden death prevents their power dynamic from ever inverting. Their relationship is also a frequent locus of the white saviorism and racial fetishization which appear throughout the series. The many moving components of age, capital, sexuality, race, and power complicate Harris and Brandstetter’s dynamic, making it a rich topic for further exploration.

Few have explored individual “Brandstetter” novels in detail. Most writing about the series focuses on the broad trends across the books, rather than close readings of specific works. There is also a limited amount of writing about the “Brandstetter” series at all, meaning any contribution to the body of literature regarding these novels would open up further avenues of dialogue and analysis. The series includes layered anxieties around sex, race and racism, bisexuality, transgender identity, and body image which have yet to be explored in scholarship. Class and classism may also be fruitful to explore, especially in light of the genre’s complicated
and at-times contentious relationship with class division, and Brandstetter’s unique status as a wealthy hard-boiled detective. *Early Graves* is also not the only novel in the series with major conventional diversions from hard-boiled detective fiction. For example, in the final novel, *A Country of Old Men*, Brandstetter dies of a heart attack mid-mystery and the novel ends before the case resolves. It may also be enlightening to explore the way the “Brandstetter” series depict hard-boiled conventions following *Early Graves*, as many of the changes made in the novel do not clearly persist through the rest of the series. Further analysis might reveal interesting conclusions in conversation with the ones I have explored while attending to *Early Graves* individually.

**X. Conclusions**

*Early Graves* insufficiently struggles to reconcile the conventions and ideologies of a formulaic genre with the chaos of an epidemic. The novel redefines, abandons, and preserves conventional elements such as individualism, knowledge, and masculinity depending on its circumstances and priorities. Redefinition is not a new technique in the “Brandstetter” series, which often recognizes the rigidity of genre, but nonetheless tries to find a way to make it function. If the heteromasculinity of the hard-boiled detective is anxious and limiting, then the preferred masculinity of the “Brandstetter” books allows for the same-gender attraction which haunts the classical mode. If the value placed on individual sexual freedom within the gay community of Los Angeles has begun to feel, in the context of the AIDS epidemic, potentially life-threatening, *Early Graves* redraws the lines of the kinds of individualism it supports. Throughout the series, a pattern emerges of the novels trying to solve the paradoxical edges of
the conventions which construct hard-boiled detective fiction, especially when circumstances such as the AIDS crisis emphasize those contradictions. The one binarism *Early Graves* cannot attempt to settle is that between knowledge and ignorance, where the necessities of mystery storytelling and critical lack of knowledge about the AIDS crisis become, for the novel, insolvably incompatible. *Early Graves* is willing to cede conventional elements such as worldly stability and knowledge, as those have already, undeniably, been lost. The ways in which *Early Graves* incompletely breaks the hard-boiled detective genre suggests acceptance of a fundamental change in the world which renders the drive to know, and to fix by knowing, noble, but ultimately pointless and self-destructive. However, the novel bends over backwards to maintain self-determination and masculinity, particularly in the form of patriarchy. Even if these latter elements are not guaranteed, the novel repeatedly depicts Brandstetter overcoming threats to masculine individualism. It has been destabilized, but not lost. Self-determination and masculinity are, to the detective protagonist, elements of *selfhood*, at particular risk to a disease associated with emasculation and losses of speech and agency. *Early Graves* cedes nothing which has not already been lost in an epidemic. The elements of detective fiction which the novel is most hesitant to break are both the most fragile and the most vital, arguably, to both people affected by the AIDS epidemic and to the genre itself: agency, selfhood, and control. In terms of genre subversion, *Early Graves* follows common crisis rules: take only necessities and leave the rest behind.
Works Cited:


—. *The Boy Who Was Buried This Morning*. Viking, 1990.


